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Guest Column
by Jerry Markatos

Tackling vexing issues
Was it Love, or Anti-Semitism?

When journalists and media feature a sensational version of reality without bothering to check the accusations, sometimes we just laugh or roll our eyes. But topics like anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and racism are too important to misrepresent, and that's why it's worth another look at the situation described in an opinion column by John Hood, which repeated a smear against two great universities, UNC and Duke and the 20 or so cosponsors who supported the conference, "Conflict over Gaza: People, Politics and Possibilities."

In a video attacking the conference Israeli Palestinian rapper Tamer Nafir is shown using the term "Anti-Semitic" sarcastically as he introduced a love song popular in Israel, about a Palestinian man and an Israeli Jewish woman who fell in love when they were stuck in an elevator.

The Cambridge English Dictionary defines sarcasm as "Remarks that clearly mean the opposite of what they say..." It's hard to imagine a clearer opposite follow-up than his love song. Yet a doctored version of this opening event was foisted on lazy media and a trusting public. Community members justifiably on edge over white supremacist attacks on a Jewish congregation in Pittsburgh, complained to university officials some of whom apologized for the misrepresented conference.

Anyone evaluating the attack video need only search "videographer Ami Horowitz" for help in evaluating it. If you agree with Horowitz' pieces portraying the public and our universities as gullible fools, or such claims as "the UN is spreading chaos and war," then maybe you'd have published this video too.

When I worked as a press photographer, the editors I knew would have checked the source and the song transcending tribal loyalties, and seen that it contradicts Horowitz' claim. The lyrics and social commentary of "Mama I Fell in Love with a Jew" can be found on YouTube where the music video is posted: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zxX_yWM2us

A few years ago, fire-breathing partisan David Horowitz had been invited by a campus group at UNC to speak about Palestine and Israel. His divisive and disrespectful rants were well known and curious students came to hear his talk. After his comments veered to smears and distortions, students from both Jewish and Palestinian solidarity groups stood up together and walked out. This reflects the climate of serious study and calm search for a sustainable peace fostered by the same academics who planned this year's conference, and it made me proud of UNC.

When a desperate population in Gaza whose commerce, jobs, water supply, sewage treatment equipment, electricity access, airspace and fishing rights are all controlled or denied, whose fault is it when people exposed to these conditions lash out or "rush the gates"? For over a year, demonstrations at Gaza's border have been subjected to sniper fire that has killed hundreds of civilians, wounded thousands, and killed even clearly identified medics and journalists.

Former US State Department officer Lara Friedman spoke at the conference. Her article "Why So Much Fuss About a Conference in North Carolina?" was published after the attack video exploited concerns and fears following attacks on Jews and Moslems in this country. Her summary of the balanced and serious contributions of the conference is worth reading online. Friedman is former head of Americans for Peace Now, a Jewish organization that promotes a peace agreement between the State of Palestine and the State of Israel. She writes, "Those who want to shut down criticism of Israel would have disliked much of what was said; those who feel the same way about the criticism of Hamas, the Palestinian Authority, Egypt, the Gulf states, the United States, and Europe would have been similarly unhappy."

Her article concludes, "The attacks on the UNC-Duke conference—alongside continuing efforts to pass laws defining criticism of Israel as anti-Semitism—demonstrate that... campus free speech, when it comes to Israel, is very much under attack today—by those who want to shut down all criticism of Israel."

The unaccountable speech and "news" that has overtaken politics in many parts of the world displaces honest discussion. Journalism schools are shrinking and public relations curriculums expand. In today's toxic climate, can we still overcome division to achieve equal rights for all? Maybe, but it will only be by defending our schools and colleges as they equip students to deal knowledgeably with the vexing issues we face.

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Jerry Markatos of Pittsboro is member of the interfaith Jewish, Muslim and Christian group AIME, Abrahamic Initiative on the Middle East. Markatos received the 2009 International Human Rights Award by the NC Human Rights Coalition [currently on hiatus following the death of its founder] for his work since 1991 with the monthly program series Balance & Accuracy in Journalism.